

A Review of the Research on Children and Young People who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour Online

Aims

Understanding of children displaying harmful sexual behaviour online (HSB) is limited, and there has previously been no attempt to synthesise available literature or draw parallels with research with adults. As such, the NSPCC undertook a literature review in order to explore and collate current research on:

- The developmental appropriateness of children and young people accessing indecent images of children (IIOC)
- If children and young people who display online HSB differ to those displaying offline HSB
- Whether there is a cross-over between online and offline HSB.

Key Findings

- Existing research indicates that between 4 and 17% of children have viewed violent and/ or illegal pornography, including indecent images of children or bestiality. This is more likely to be the case for children that view high levels of pornography.
- Whilst viewing IIOC is illegal, it is not possible to ascertain from the available evidence whether this behaviour could be developmentally appropriate (i.e., viewing images of similar-aged peers) as there is insufficient information available on the nature of the images and the ages of the victims in them.
- There are several reasons why a young person may view indecent images of children: accidentally, out of curiosity, sexual deviancy, or peer pressure. However, these motivations may alter over time and sexual interest may become the primary motivating factor following increased exposure.
- There are only 4 studies which explore the characteristics of children that have viewed indecent images of children online, compared with children who have sexually abused other children offline. From this research, it appears that young people who have viewed IIOC tend to be older than those with offline HSB, come from more stable backgrounds, have a better level of education, and have less previous convictions and anti-social behaviour. They also tend to display higher level of sexual interest in children, have greater friendship difficulties, and experience more cognitive distortions. This correlates with research exploring adult online offenders compared to adult offline offenders.
- Only a small proportion of young people who have viewed IIOC go onto reoffend, either online or offline, with less than 1.9% reoffending rate found from two studies. In comparison, reoffending rates for children who display HSB offline was found to be 7%.
- There is a small amount of crossover between online and offline sexual offending (less than 3% crossover in two studies, with an additional study reporting higher rates) and a relationship

between viewing of IIOC and offline sexually coercive behaviour. This is dependent, however, on the type of reporting used within a study; studies with adult offenders that ask them to self-report their offending history tend to identify a higher rate of cross-over between online and offline sexual offending than those who rely only on officially detected rates of sexual offending.

- There are several gaps available research which should be pursued going forward:
 - Motivating factors behind children's online HSB
 - Prevalence of online HSB amongst children and young people with learning difficulties
 - Dual online and offline offenders
 - Young people engaging in online HSB, other than viewing IIOC.

To address the identified gaps in the research literature, the authors of the review are currently conducting research on the case files of children and young people accessing the NSPCC's service for HSB ('Turn the Page'). The research report will be published in early 2017.

Methodology

A systematic search strategy for research published between 2000 and 2015 was applied to five different research platforms containing published and unpublished (grey literature) research. Predefined search terms were used and 758 articles were identified – 453 after duplicates were removed. The abstracts of all these articles were read, as well as the main texts of articles that appeared relevant. The review focused primarily on research with children and young people, but findings from systematic reviews and meta-analyses of research with adults were also included for comparison. There were several limitations to the review which should be noted:

- Very little research has been carried out looking at online HSB amongst children, and that which has been undertaken has been based on small sample sizes of males only.
- Various definitions of online sexual offending are applied by the research included in this review and offending rates differ depending on the way in which they were reported.

Source: A review of the Research on Children and Young People who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour Online

Report available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/review-children-young-people-harmful-sexual-behaviour-online.pdf>

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